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SUBJECT: Havana Lessons Learned from Crisis Management Exercise

Ref: FSINFATC 002235

¶1. On 09/30/08, USINT Havana participated in a crisis management exercise (CME) moderated by the Foreign Service Institute's Crisis Management Training Center. Given our recent experience with Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, Post was uniquely qualified to work through all of the challenges presented during the CME and we utilized many lessons learned in the training scenario. Overall, Havana benefited from the exercise by refining certain practices and developing new ideas for dealing with a natural disaster in Cuba. Attendees included the DCM, RSO, MGT, POL/ECON, USCG, MED, GSO, FMS, PD, CONS, CLO, MSG and DHS offices.

¶2. Post's response to reftel is forwarded below and keyed to paragraphs 2, A-H:

¶A. Format of the CME: Post believes that the three-hour format was adequate based on our recent hurricane experiences. We were able to provide a high degree of detail and specificity in our decision-making that would not have been possible without the experience of Gustav and Ike. Rather than deal in hypotheticals, we knew what worked and what didn't. In retrospect, three hours is not a long time to work through the preparation, execution and review phases of a crisis but it allowed our Emergency Action Committee enough time to test Havana's hurricane plan and determine what works and what needs attention.

¶B. Selection of Scenarios: The hurricane scenario was appropriate and addressed a valid concern for Post. The goal was to test our emergency action plan for ensuring the safety and security of USINT personnel and family members; maintaining some semblance of operational continuity; and dealing with multiple infrastructure problems while coordinating our response. The potential benefit of the CME was somewhat lessened, however, by our recent experience with Gustav and Ike. Given local conditions, a scenario involving civil disorder and/or demonstrations which transform into a direct threat to USINT would also be helpful for Post planning purposes.

¶C. Controller Intervention: Controller Michael Braxton demonstrated keen insight to USINT's unique relationship with the host country and the numerous logistical challenges that we deal with daily throughout the exercise. Whether it's the difficulty of reaching out to wardens in the pre- and post-disaster timeframe, or coordinating TDY assistance after-the-fact, he understood that Havana is not your normal Post. In one particularly illustrative example, the Controller learned from Post's experience that communication with the Department might be difficult before, during and after a natural disaster and provided alternatives to voice or cable updates using existing technologies.

¶D. What would Post do differently: The short answer is not much. USINT feels that we have developed and tested a workable emergency action plan for dealing with the numerous challenges inherent in a natural disaster, as evidenced by our response to hurricanes Gustav and Ike. The CME did provide, however, insight to alternatives for

consular/warden outreach, public diplomacy information updates, and internet/intranet communication capabilities that we may incorporate into our existing plan.

E. Lessons Learned: Post's EAC agreed that this was a good exercise which forced us to reexamine various components of our EAP. Specific examples include - how to provide the broad range of communication updates expected by the Department via a host-country infrastructure that is especially sensitive to atmospheric conditions and questionable reliability; is there a better or more efficient way to pass warden messages, update the consular information sheets, and provide a list of what USINT can and cannot do for U.S. citizens with regard to evacuation planning and actual departures; and finally the need to establish more specific and timely tripwires to work through the decision-making and logistical processes for requesting authorized or ordered departure.

F. CMT Overview: The overview was helpful in that we had a number of attendees who had never participated in a crisis management exercise. They learned about the Department's emergency response mechanism and some key background and coordination aspects that will benefit them in future crises. In terms of improvement, Post does not recommend any changes to the overview presentation.

G. Frequency of CME: Post feels that the current CME schedule (every 24 to 30 months) is adequate and generally coincides with the personnel rotation at USINT. Given Cuba's geographic location, there is a strong likelihood that we will practice the hurricane preparedness / disaster management portion of our EAP on an annual or biannual basis. As to whether all posts should have an equal opportunity to practice CME's with the same frequency, Post feels strongly that emergency preparedness cuts across borders and threat levels. We have learned over the last decade that all U.S. diplomatic missions are susceptible to natural disasters, political upheaval and terrorist attacks/attempted attacks. That - combined with the fact that Department personnel rotate every two to three years, and emergency planning is a perishable skill - reinforces the notion that CME planning should apply to all Posts equally.

H. Other Comments: Post would like to thank the Crisis Management Training Center and moderator for their assistance in planning and facilitating the CME. Hurricane Kelsey provided a true worst-case scenario that stretched our capabilities and forced us to consider a post-disaster environment that hasn't been seen in Cuba (but is certainly possible). Our EAC is better informed and cognizant of the potential gaps and opportunities to improve our emergency action plan.

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